Embedding University-Community Partnership Working

South East Coastal Communities Dissemination Paper 4

The South East Coastal Communities (SECC) programme provided a focal point for community engagement within all nine higher education institutions involved. In this fourth paper in the SECC dissemination series, we explore the importance of an institutional strategy in embedding community engagement for the long term and identify its practical implications.

Key Points

- Sustaining university-community engagement requires strategic institutional commitment and practical follow-through at all university management levels.

- Some funding is needed to underpin engagement activity. Project funding needs light-touch accountability structures.

- SECC has impacted positively on teaching, learning and research at the participating universities.

Pictures Courtesy of Danny Weinstein

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South East Coastal Communities Project Dissemination Series

Introduction to South East Coastal Communities

The South East Coastal Communities (SECC) project was funded in 2008 by the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) for three years. It brought together nine universities spanning the South East of England coastal region – University of Chichester, University of Brighton, University of Sussex, University of Portsmouth, University of Southampton, Southampton Solent University, University of Kent, University of Greenwich and Canterbury Christ Church University – to form a collaborative and strategic approach to university-community engagement. In particular, the universities were asked to work in partnership with local third sector and community groups to build the capacity of those organisations to meet the health and well-being needs of their coastal communities.

Each sub-region took a different approach to defining their community: Hampshire explored the potential of their universities to support local social enterprise; the Kent universities took a place-based approach by concentrating on Swale and the Isle of Sheppey; and the Sussex institutions focused on particular sections of the community identified by common interest or identity, such as older people or refugees. Health and well-being was a purposefully broad category to cohere the differing institutional interests and ambitions within the SECC project.

Why South East coastal communities? Although the South East area of England is generally regarded as prosperous, there are pockets of severe deprivation and exclusion. Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation Indices[1], it is possible to identify a rim of deprivation stretching from Gravesend, Sheppey, Margate and Dover in the east, moving down to Folkestone, Hastings, parts of Brighton and Hove, Worthing and moving west to Portsmouth and Southampton. South East coastal towns are often sites of declining ports, heavy industry and former defence towns and may lack the necessary investment to re-orient successfully towards tourism or other service sector industries.

University-community engagement is often interpreted as public engagement in research or making available university libraries and sports halls to the local community. SECC required universities to do something much more radical. It asked them to connect their intellectual resources with the knowledge and experience of their local third sector organisations and community groups to address issues of mutual interest together. A concrete example would be a university academic partnering with a drug and alcohol voluntary service to conduct a user-needs analysis and then co-producing a tailored model of care. In each case, partnerships were expected to articulate clearly the mutual benefit both for the external organisation and for the university (academics and students).

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[1] The Multiple Deprivation Indices are available for 2004 and 2007 at the Department for Communities and Local Government website http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/research/indicesdeprivation/. The 2010 Indices are due to be published on 24 March 2011

As well as test ideas, build infrastructure and partnerships, the SECC institutions were also charged with contributing to the national policy debate on university-community engagement and potentially to act as a regional demonstrator for sustaining engagement work. In three years, a tall order indeed. This dissemination series shares some frank insights from the SECC experience as well as reflections on the future of university-community engagement. It will be of interest to university engagement practitioners, senior university managers, policymakers and statutory and community partners.

Paper 1: The Future of University-Community Engagement

Paper 2: Models of Partnership Working in University-Community Engagement

Paper 3: Geographies of Collaboration in University-Community Engagement

Paper 4: Embedding University-Community Partnership Working

Paper 5: Measuring the Impact of University-Community Engagement (forthcoming)

South East Coastal Communities Project Dissemination Series Paper 4: Embedding University-Community Partnership Working

Key Points

- Sustaining university-community engagement requires strategic institutional commitment and practical follow-through at all university management levels. Examples include financial reward and academic recognition for staff and a dedicated infrastructure for responding to and channelling community enquires.

- Some funding is needed to underpin engagement activity and this will principally be to buy out the time of academics. Small amounts of project funding need light-touch accountability structures or they could be a disincentive to potential engagers.

- SECC has impacted on teaching, learning and research at the participating universities through, for example, prompting curriculum change or enabling student placements. An unexpected outcome of the SECC project is the potential for (and realisation of) knowledge-based spin-outs which offer a vehicle for sustaining university-community engagement in the longer term.

Introduction

A key aim of the South East Coastal Communities (SECC) programme was to raise the profile of community engagement work within the participating universities from a niche activity to an institutional priority. The impact of the SECC programme has in truth been variable. Where SECC remained a discretely managed project, and where the contribution of senior management was weak, then the programme really only had significant impact on the Schools and Departments directly involved. For those institutions with a long history and significant financial resources, it was perhaps wishful thinking that the SECC programme could make significant strategic in-roads. But the programme did provide a potential focal point for community engagement within all the institutions. It also provided some resource and legitimacy for academics, either to build their existing engagement work or to try it out for the first time. In this fourth paper in the SECC dissemination series, we recognise the importance of an institutional strategy in embedding community engagement for the long term and identify its practical implications.

An institutional strategy for community engagement

The quality of a strategy document should not be judged by its width. To genuinely enable and embed community engagement in their institutions, university senior managers should use a strategy to set the tone, identify and address the structural barriers, put in light-touch mechanisms for funding and evaluation – and then let people get on with it. The SECC programme highlighted some organisational, cultural and financial issues which needed to be addressed and these are likely to be common across institutions:

Academic recognition

Community engagement activity needs to be built in to personal development plans and to the reward and recognition systems for academics. Too often, academics do this work in their own time, and without any clear benefit to their career path. Interestingly, the national policy discourse may change that, with the Research Councils initiative on embedding 'public engagement'[2] and the new criterion of 'demonstrating the wider impact of research' as part of the Research Excellence Framework[3]. But within the sector itself, there continues to be scepticism about the benefits that community-based knowledge can bring to teaching and research. As such, it is still often regarded as 'lower status' work. Recognition and reward structures for community engagement can be a concrete and powerful way of re-asserting its value at an institutional level. And this must be carried through by Deans, Heads of Department and other middle managers.

Academic support

It is important to provide academics with space to share experiences, learn from each other and inform future work. While academics will often be most interested in their academic discipline – for example, health promotion or music therapy – it is the process of community engagement, and particularly the relationship-building, that can be the most difficult bit to get right. In the SECC programme, the institutional leads and project co-ordinators have in effect produced their own support mechanism in each sub-region and the programme evaluation feedback suggests that it has been very effective.

Some universities, or clusters of universities, may choose a more formal structure to do this, having a department or unit for engagement, for example. There are dangers in this approach: community engagement could become marginalised or bureaucratic. On the other hand, it may evolve significant expertise and provide a tangible symbol of institutional commitment to staff.

[2] See Research Council UK webpage 'Public Engagement with Research', available at http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/per/Pages/Home.aspx (accessed 13 January 2011)

[3] See HEFCE webpage 'REF2014', available at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/ (accessed 13 January 2011)

Academic infrastructure

As important as supporting existing work is ensuring that new projects come through the pipeline. This is of particular interest to institutions thinking of embarking strategically on the community engagement journey. While there is often understandable concern about 'infrastructure' and the way in which it has a tendency to absorb funding destined for the frontline, the SECC experience suggests three key needs:

- Providing an interface for attracting community enquiries.

- Dealing with those enquiries in an appropriate manner, and supporting academics who work on enquiries.

Universities will have similar systems in place for their business interaction and some may choose to graft on their community engagement work, although they should bear in mind that the marketing literature and communication style for each may be ill-attuned. Well-organised interface mechanisms can build their own momentum over time and this has been demonstrated through SECC. First impressions are vital in relationship-building.

Money

Some funding is crucial to buy out the time of academics: too often academics are 'interested but too busy' (Hart and Wolff, 2006[4]). Money is also needed to initiate the academic infrastructure and support outlined above. However, a key finding of the SECC programme was that significant levels of funding can perversely act as a disincentive where they introduce laborious project management and monitoring requirements. Light-touch accountability structures are needed for small pockets of project funding.

Sustainability

As we have discussed elsewhere in this series of dissemination papers, sustainability is a term that is used liberally, but which is rarely unpicked for its meaning and implications. Too often, there is an expectation by funders that projects will be miraculously absorbed at the end of the funding period. For their part, bid writers relay their sustainability plans assiduously at submission stage, but these are often vague and hypothetical. It is almost too far over the horizon to really grasp what sustainability might mean in practical terms for a project at the outset.

As we draw to the close of the SECC programme, we can see what sustainability looks like more clearly. The projects generated by the programme fall in to three camps: some were always finite activities with a defined outcome; some projects were initiated but, despite best endeavours, have failed; and then there is a large number of projects are looking to

[4] Hart, A. and Wolff, D. (2006) 'Developing local "Communities of Practice" through local Community-University Partnerships', Planning Practice & Research 21 (1) 121-138

continue their legacy.

In terms of the influence on learning, teaching and research, most institutions can point to examples of where SECC has led to curriculum change: this includes the development of new teaching modules and teaching materials at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. In addition, students have benefited from work experience or volunteering experience incorporated in to their programmes and representatives from the community organisations have also been involved in delivering learning. The SECC projects have also provided a number of research projects and dissertation themes at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Examples of impact on teaching, learning and research:

In **Kent**, studies of changing lives on the Isle of Sheppey being carried out by academics at the University of Kent and the University of Southampton build on seminal studies undertaken by Ray Pahl and Claire Wallace in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The partnerships between Canterbury Christ Church University and Swale gypsy/traveller support groups, and between University of Greenwich and members of the BME community through Diversity House, are addressing the health needs of specific communities by training community members to promote health equality and disseminate learning. This work contributes to health promotion research agendas and has attracted regional and national political interest.

In **Hampshire**, the University of Portsmouth has run two successful summer intern programmes for its Architecture students, where students work in project teams to develop a design brief to budget for real clients in the community. The programme develops their business, presentation and leadership skills as well as giving them experience of high pressure team-working. Southampton Solent University (SSU) has developed a social enterprise unit to add to its 'Curriculum Plus' series, a programme of non-course related units offered to all students at the University. This complements a developing programme of work on the social enterprise agenda at SSU.

In **Sussex**, the award-winning project Count Me In Too has used SECC funding to disseminate the findings of its qualitative and quantitative surveys of members of the LGBT community in Brighton. The research work revealed opinions and experiences on a wide range of topics, including domestic violence and abuse, housing and mental health. The project brought these findings to the attention of local service-providers, commissioners and strategic policy heads. The data collection and analysis has also been digitised to make it available to future researchers. Count Me In Too is noted for contributing to national and international research, based on local foundations. At the University Centre Hastings (UCH), a Coastal Regeneration Research Centre has been established, developed in part

using SECC funds, which is working with local community and voluntary organisations on projects that support the social and economic regeneration of Hastings and St Leonards.

For other projects hoping to continue, some will bid to be mainstreamed in to their institution's activity, or in to the activity of the community partner, or both. Many will be starting the process of applying for new funding. But a particularly exciting - and unexpected - outcome of the SECC programme is the development of knowledge-based social enterprise spin-outs.

University spin-outs are of course nothing new, although they have tended to be located in the science, engineering and technology-based disciplines. But the SECC programme is potentially generating knowledge based social enterprises in the arts and social sciences.

Examples of social enterprise spin-outs

In 2010, academics from the **University of Brighton** partnered with a community organisation to establish a Community Interest Company (CIC) called 'boing boing' (http://www.boingboing.org.uk/). 'boing boing' was created to deliver and disseminate research on resilience in children from disadvantaged backgrounds and provide a sustainable model for developing further research and practice in this area. At **Southampton Solent University**, academics are looking to partner with a local community trust to use a part-empty building on James Street to provide incubation space for local social enterprises, including student social enterprises. At the **University of Chichester**, explorations are underway in to how the successful Life Music programme could be put on an enterprise footing.

Promoting social enterprise spin-outs is only part of the solution to sustaining community-university engagement activity, but an exciting one in a favourable political climate. Academics can scale up the work at their own pace and the very survival of an enterprise will demonstrate responsiveness and value. More work is needed to understand what mechanisms are needed to nurture this sort of activity within universities.

Conclusions

The experience of the SECC programme is that embedding community engagement across an institution requires senior level commitment through an institutional strategy. A strategy can be a powerful mandate for staff to get involved, but it also relies on middle managers to move the strategy from a being a piece of paper to enacting the required cultural and process change. By putting in place the right academic infrastructure, support, recognition and small-scale funding, community engagement can inform teaching and research as well as create its own momentum, bringing significant benefits to staff, students and community partners. This core provision could also inspire new sustainability mechanisms for the future, such as knowledge-based spin-outs.

Contact details

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